

PRESS RELEASE



The Cleveland Museum of Art

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For Immediate Release

KOREAN TREASURES ON VIEW IN EXHIBITION 5,000 YEARS OF KOREAN ART

5,000 Years of Korean Art, a major exhibition of 345 objects from the national museums of Korea, opens at The Cleveland Museum of Art, Wednesday, June 11. The exhibition, which is on a two year tour of the United States, includes many objects that have been discovered in recent archaeological excavations and are being displayed for the first time in the Western World.

Dating from the dawn of Korean history through the Yi Dynasty (1392-1910), the exhibition shows Korea's cultural importance as both a transmitter and creator. Influenced by the art of China, Japan, and even the Western world, Korea took the styles and traditions that came with invading armies and transformed them to fit a distinctively Korean vision, combining the exuberant spirituality of Shamanism, the naturalism of Taoism, the devotion of Buddhism, and the disciplined harmony of Confucianism.

Sherman E. Lee, director and chief curator of Oriental art at The Cleveland Museum of Art describes the exhibition as "an extraordinary opportunity to see and understand the history of Korea's artistic production. The most complete and highest quality assemblage of the fine art of a single people ever to come to this country."

The exhibition can be divided into five chronological periods. The first is the Prehistoric and Early Historic Period. Extending from around 3,000 to the first century BC, this period is represented by 11 objects. The oldest is an earthenware jar (ca. 3,000 BC), and eight of the pieces are bronzes from the seventh through first centuries BC.

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2-5,000 years of korean art

The second period runs from the first century BC until the seventh century AD and is called the Three Kingdoms Period. The peninsula was divided into kingdoms struggling for power: warlike Koguryo in the north, Paekche in the fertile southwest, and mineral-rich Silla in the southeast. Culturally these kingdoms made important contributions to Far Eastern civilization, and some of the most interesting objects in the exhibition come from this period: notably the magnificent gold and jade royal crowns with their stylized tree-shaped and antler-shaped parts which seem to reflect shamanistic beliefs or traditions. Unknown in China, such crowns are thought to be derived from Siberian prototypes.

Also during this period Buddhism and Buddhist art styles entered Korea from China and were in turn transmitted to Japan. One of the most beautiful pieces in the exhibition is an early seventh-century gilt bronze seated Maitreya (the Buddha of the Future). It is one of the finest Buddhist sculptures in eastern Asia and is particularly significant because of the clear connection between it and certain Japanese Buddhist statues of the seventh century.

The years between 668 and 918 are known as the Unified Silla Period. Silla with the help of T'ang China united the country for the first time and made Buddhism the state religion. Chinese T'ang styles were adapted throughout Korea, and many large Buddhist sculptures were created.

The Koryo Period (918-1392) was a time of lavish aristocratic culture dominated by a Buddhist church at the peak of its power in Korea. The crowning achievement of Korean potters, the inlay technique, is richly evident in this period. Finely painted gold and silver Buddhist texts were produced, and many of the small Buddhist vessels from this period are remarkable for their unadorned, functional beauty.

The Yi Period (1392-1910) saw the rise of Confucianism and the fall of Buddhism in Korea. The major artistic contributions of this period are found in

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3-5,000 years of korean art

painting and ceramics. With their plain, sturdy shapes, Yi ceramics show an important break with Koryo wares. Typically Korean, they reveal a strong preference for white, associated with purity and order. Japanese invasions (1592-1598) had an important effect on the culture of the country. Potters were carried off to Japan, and vital art forms such as punch'ong ceramics (slip coated blue-green stoneware) all but died out in Korea.

In 1637 the country became a tributary of China and remained so until the end of the nineteenth century. Even so, the Yi Period was distinguished by important local developments such as the emergence of secular paintings focusing on Korean scenery, everyday street life, and the leisure world of the upper class.

Organized by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Korea, the National Museum of Korea, and the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, the exhibition is supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Cleveland showing is also assisted by a grant from the Ohio Arts Council.

A 192-page catalog illustrating all the objects (32 in color) can be purchased at The Cleveland Museum of Art sales desk for \$5.00. A guide to the exhibition prepared by Marjorie Williams and Joellen DeOreo of The Cleveland Museum of Art's Department of Art History and Education will be available for \$.25.

Korea: Bridge of Culture, a supporting exhibition organized by the Museum's Department of Art History and Education, examines Korea's role in transmitting religious beliefs and artistic styles from China to Japan, and will be on view in the Museum's classroom level exhibition gallery concurrently with 5,000 Years of Korean Art.

A variety of lectures, gallery talks, films, and audio-visual programs, listed in an accompanying press release, are also scheduled in conjunction with the exhibition.